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ABSTRACT

While rhetoric is conventionally associated with argumentation and discussions of discrete language forms (such as pronouns) which are usually housed in lingustics, clearly there are forms of rhetoric that are not obviously propositional. Moreover, sometimes very small language units can be deployed to great persuasive effect. Muriel Rukeyser's rewriting of the Oedipus myth is evidence of such an effect. When Oedipus, old and blind, asks the Sphinx why he did not recognize his own mother, the Sphinx explains that when he asked, "What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening?" Oedipus answered "Man." "You didn't say anything about woman," the Sphinx explains. When Oedipus protests that "everybody knows" that "Man" designates both genders, the Sphinx answers, "That's what you think." By means of a strategic disruption of the conventional use of generic "man," Rukeyser is engaging in rhetoric, trying to persuade readers to abandon reified notions of gender and subjectivity. Analyses of Virginia Woolf's "Orlando," Marge Piercy's "Woman on the Edge of Time," Jeanette Winterson's "Written on the Body," and June Arnold's "The Cook and the Carpenter" show how some women authors intentionally confuse their readers about the gender pronouns in their book in an attempt to raise significant issues about gender. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

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Pronominal Outlaws

While rhetoric is conventionally associated with argumentation and discussions of discrete language forms such as pronouns are usually housed in linguistics, clearly there are forms of rhetoric that are not obviously propositional. Moreover, sometimes very small language units can be deployed to great persuasive effect.

Consider the following poem by Muriel Rukeyser:

Myth

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads.
He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, "I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?"
"You gave the wrong answer," said the Sphinx.
"But that was what made everything possible," said Oedipus.
"No," she said. "When I asked, 'What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening,' you answered, 'Man.' You didn't say anything about woman."
"When you say Man," said Oedipus, "You include women too. Everyone knows that."

She said, "That's what you think." (139-40)

What Rukeyser's poem achieves is a sophistic transformation of linguistic rules; the rule that states that man refers to both men and women is reduced from noeisis or knowledge: "Everyone knows that" to doxa or opinion: "That's what you think." Along with it goes the status of language as transparent and given. Certainly Rukeyser makes her point here much more quickly and directly than she would have had she used a traditional argumentative structure. By means of a strategic disruption of the conventional use of generic "man," then, Rukeyser is engaging in rhetoric, trying to persuade readers to abandon reified notions of gender and subjectivity.

I recall watching the struggle between traditional argumentation and more direct interventions in language regarding gender in a faculty senate meeting at Portland State University about twenty years ago. Those of us who had worked hard to construct a proposal for a Women's Studies Program at Portland State were in attendance to watch the faculty debate that proposal. Clearly, some faculty were not pleased with it and were looking for ways to ensure its demise. One gentleman rose to speak and pointed out that because the pronoun used to designate the program coordinator in the proposal was "she," men were therefore effectively eliminated from the pool of potential hires, a blatant violation of affirmative

action guidelines. Tony Wolk, from the English Department, to his everlasting credit, pointed out that if the generic "he" may refer to either a man or a woman, then of course the generic "she" as a parallel linguistic form must mean the same thing. The proposal passed, and the program has flourished for the past twenty years.

These two examples were perhaps opening volleys in an attack on the gender system of the English language. Neither attempted to unravel the man/woman or he/she binary, but both were aimed at undoing the unexamined linguistic status of gender hierarchy.

What I wish to explore today are more examples of attempts to intervene directly in what Paul Thibault (41) calls the "dialectic of system-maintaining and system-changing relations and practices in the social semiotic," particularly inventive uses of pronoun alternatives--the semiotic equivalent, perhaps, of direct action.

Although writers for centuries have attempted to change the pronoun systems of English and other languages, the pronoun disruptions I am investigating are twentieth-century feminist versions. Pressures from women have produced both feminist linguistic advice books as well as some changes in standard handbooks and rhetorics. These are attempts to restabilize the pronoun system in a manner not so egregiously marginalizing to

women. Such advice is familiar to us now and includes pluralizing and using forms such as "he or she."

My favorite handbook example comes from William Barnwell's *Writing for a Reason.* Barnwell says:

> If you do use the expression he or she (or him or her) try not to use it more than once in a paragraph, and never use it more than once in a sentence. Never write:
>
> He or she left his or her umbrella in the auditorium. (429)

Barnwell advises:

> If you can't figure out another way to say what you mean, just forget about the umbrella. (429)

The title of this segment in Barnwell's book I also find amusing: "Avoiding Gender Confusion." Perhaps Barnwell meant the title ironically. However, if he did not, then we see that it assumes--as do the examples I listed above and, indeed, most of the advice books and handbooks, an unproblematic acceptance of the bipolar language system that insists that every person be assigned to one of only two exclusive categories. Such a system doesn't begin to account for the tremendous range in human subjectivity.

The writings I will discuss do not have as their object the avoidance of gender confusion; in fact, they may perversely function to encourage such confusion. Rewriting gender can only begin in

confusion, as a stable but stultifying system is dismantled and new systems are dialectically constructed.

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss the ways that experimenters have reworked pronouns in texts designed to persuade readers to question prescribed subjectivities.

In a preface to her 1973 novel *The Cook and the Carpenter*, June Arnold writes:

> Since the differences between men and women are so obvious to all, so impossible to confuse whether we are speaking of learned behavior or inherent characteristics, ordinary conversation or furious passion, work or intimate relationships, the author understands that it is no longer necessary to distinguish between men and women in this novel. I have therefore used one pronoun for both, trusting the reader to know which is which. (n.p.)[1]

Arnold then tells a story of the activities of a commune in a small Texas town, noting especially the interactions between residents of the town and residents of the commune. Instead of talking about *she* and *he*, Arnold uses the pronouns *na* and *nan*, until the very end of the story, at which time she "reveals" identities, resolving the considerable problems the reader has doubtless had throughout the novel.

Not only is Arnold re-writing the pronoun system in English, she is establishing herself as the ironic rhetor. Because the subjectivities she wishes to convey are written out of the system, she is disempowered by the conventional signs of English; to attempt to write an argument within those signs would succeed only in re-establishing them. Thus, her only option is to argue by means of new signs. Yet she knows that she is working against a system that is massive and tenacious in its grip on human consciousness; all she can do is undo it briefly. So, unlike more naive and ingenuous writers, who appear to believe that merely suggesting a new pronoun system will ensure its acceptance, Arnold plays with her readers, wryly dismantling their gender convictions. Thus, while she is not engaged in a propositional argument, she follows a rhetorical tradition in her deployment of irony. Linguist Dennis Baron misses Arnold's rhetorical point of the book, however, when he says, in a chapter on neologistic pronouns,

> There is often little or no information available to help us analyze the process whereby epicene pronouns come into being. For example, June Arnold uses *na* and *nan*, without comment, for all third person pronouns in her novel *The Cook and the Carpenter* (1973), whereas in *Sister Gin* (1975) she silently reverts to conventional pronoun usage. (209)

Because Dennis Baron, held in thrall, perhaps, by the discipline of linguistics, doesn't get it, is Arnold at fault? Is June Arnold engaging in deceit, as Jan Swearingen, following Plato, would have it? Is it the responsibility of rhetors to write into the existing systems of signs, in the interests of community cohesiveness?

Jeanette Winterson slyly suggests otherwise. Using what Judy Grahn, describing Gertrude Stein's rhetorical practice, refers to as "calling without naming," Winterson uses only the first person pronoun--I--for the main character in her 1994 novel, *Written on the Body*. Readers never are told the name or the gender of the main character. And because the whole story is one of obsessive love on the part of this character for a woman named Louise, the effect of this not-naming is to suggest a subject position that is free from conventional gender constraints. Like Stein, Winterson is writing gender-challenging prose in a thoroughly gendered universe. If fixed categories--names such as "men" and "women" or "wife" and "husband"--have limited us, then dispensing with those names moves us beyond the limits. However, just as the reader of *The Cook and the Carpenter* probably spends the entire novel trying to figure out the conventional gender assignments of the characters, so the reader of *Written on the Body* also tries to locate in social semiotics the protagonist of that novel. As a reader, one

embarrassedly has to admit that one has spent the entire novel trying to identify and place the characters. One has been trying to engage in what Kenneth Burke terms "consubstantiality"--with mixed results. On the one hand, one has failed to identify, definitively, the gender of the protagonist; on the other hand, because of this intense desire for identification, one has had to disrupt and unravel one's own notion of gender in the first place. Winterson's novel, like Stein's writing, as Grahn says, "diffus[es] into little electron arrows seeking whatever is rigid and prejudiced in me, the reader, of whatever gender or other names I might go by in daily life" (Grahn 268). Gender, in other words, is a place, one which can be entered or left, not an identity, Winterson tells us. Every time we act, we act gender. Thus, gender is like a character; it can be changed at will, Winterson seems to be saying. Indeed, some lesbian readers have been annoyed at Winterson for precisely this move on her part. Expecting her to bring forth bold political statements about the centrality of lesbian identity, in the manner of her earlier novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, some readers have been disappointed by an apparent shift away from material politics.

Unlike Winterson, Marge Piercy, writing in the 1970s, clearly articulates the connections between language, power, and material existence. Recognizing the utopian gesture of any endeavor to re-

write the pronoun system, Piercy locates her attempt in a thoroughly changed Massachusetts, one hundred fifty years in the future, though this place may exist only in the mind of her main character, Consuelo, or Connie, an impoverished Puerto Rican woman who is confined to Bellevue Hospital for the crime of breaking the nose of her niece's pimp. The culture of Luciente, who contacts Connie and transports her to this "new world," is environmentally conscious and sexually and racially egalitarian. It is all the things that 1976 New York City is not. By contrasting conditions in New York City for Connie and her family with the utopian home of the androgynous Luciente, whose culture uses no pronouns except *per*, short for *person*, Piercy reveals the alliance between the English language system and a material culture of domination and control.

Connie's story is an example of what Lester Faigley, following Lyotard, calls a "little narrative." "If grand narratives offer positions within dominant discourse as common sense," he says, "little narratives challenge those positions by providing stories of lived experience that contradict common sense. They challenge the mythic quality of grand narratives by describing the local and particular." Moreover, in this case, the embedded little narrative of Luciente's culture serves to strengthen the reader's common sense, providing a

clear contrast so that the grand narratives of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and mental disease stand out in relief.

Piercy clearly contrasts two cultures to suggest not so much a blueprint or plan to be followed in order to construct a new language and culture, but to demonstrate the failure of the arguments that support the current culture and the inadequacy of the language we take for granted. Piercy published her novel in 1976, a time during which many utopian plans were suggested and critiques of society were announced.

In contrast, Virginia Woolf published her gender-bending novel *Orlando* on October 11, 1928, only about two months after the British Home Secretary had filed suit on behalf of the Crown against Jonathan Cape, publishers of *The Well of Loneliness* after having read an unfavorable review in The *Sunday Express*. The central question of that case was: is lesbianism--particularly on the part of a character who does not meet the conventional standards for female behavior--a suitable subject for fiction? Four days before *Orlando* was published, Virginia wrote to Vita Sackville-West, the model for the main character of *Orlando*, that she was "horribly nervous" about the book's publication (*Letters* 540). She needn't have been, because while *The Well of Loneliness* gathered many damning reviews, Orlando was highly praised and sold better than any of Woolf's

previous novels. How did Woolf successfully handle more or less the same subject that Hall had attempted with such disastrous results? She loosens the pronouns from their moorings in realistic narrative, and she provides an ironic narrator.

Woolf works hard to pointedly establish a trustworthy narrator, constantly assuring us that "the biographer" is "good" and "happy" and otherwise paying very careful attention to the strictures of biographical writing. (Woolf, of course, knew the role of biographer well, as her father had worked for years on *the Dictionary of National Biography*.) Woolf's narrator combines a strict attention to ethos and conventional biographical form with a raucously hyperbolic plot and characterizations. This narrator assures us, beginning in the very first sentence of the book, that "[h]e--for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it--was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (13). It is then the same narrative voice--the one that assures us throughout the text that she is a "good biographer" carefully bringing to us an account of "the truth"--that later convinces us to accept the following pronominal confusion:

> Orlando had become a woman--there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had

> been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory--but in the future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his' and 'she' for 'he'--her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (138)

Here we get not only *he* and *she* conflated, but *their* as well. The exquisitely correct biographer assures us, following this statement, that: "It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can" (139). Given such seemingly sober reassurance, then, the Crown can hardly object to *Orlando*, when in fact the entire book is a discussion precisely of gender fluidity and unconventional sexuality of a type quite similar to that represented by Radclyffe Hall in *The Well of Loneliness*.

Virginia Woolf, Marge Piercy, Jeanette Winterson, and June Arnold are all consummate rhetors and pronominal outlaws. If we must have the stability of handbooks, let's not insist that we always avoid gender confusion.

[1] *The Cook and the Carpenter* has recently been republished by New York University Press. Unfortunately, Arnold's introductory material has been omitted from this new edition, though Bonnie Zimmerman does mention it in her introduction.

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